

## Impact of Remote Work on Work-Life Balance in the Southeastern Asia Union Mission of Seventh-day Adventists

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in remote work arrangements. While remote work has been praised for its flexibility, it is unclear how remote work affects work-life balance. This study examined the remote work practices and work-life balance of Southeastern Asia Union Mission (SEUM) Seventh-day Adventist employees, as well as those working in its subsidiary missions in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam before and during the pandemic. A quantitative survey was administered to all 121 and mission office employees of SEUM. The online survey questionnaire explored demographics, pre-pandemic work experiences, during pandemic work-life balance experiences, and remote work satisfaction.

The findings revealed a significant negative correlation (-.392,  $p < .01$ ) between remote work and work-life balance for SEUM employees. Employees generally reported a decrease in work-life balance when working remotely as compared to their pre-pandemic work experiences. Interestingly, strong organizational communication regarding remote work policies was associated with higher remote work satisfaction. This study offers valuable insights about the need to create a supportive work environment for remote employees. Recommendations include prioritizing clear communication, investing in employee well-being initiatives, and conducting further research to inform long-term remote work strategies.

**Keywords:** *Work-life balance, remote work, working from home*

### Introduction

The nature of work and working patterns are changing in this modern era (Thilagavathy & Geetha, 2020). In recent years, shared office work space standards have changed. Many businesses implemented work from home (WFH) practices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in an effort to promote social isolation and stop the disease from spreading.

The way people work has changed rapidly; instead of spending nine to five at an office workstation, people may now work remotely from the comfort of their homes (Globalization Partners, 2022). The competitive, aggressive, and demanding nature of business necessitates active involvement and total devotion from employees, which compromises their ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance (Turanligil & Farooq, 2019).

Work-life balance is a key factor in employee engagement, productivity, and retention (Qualtrics, 2024). Employees who work remotely can maintain a healthy lifestyle, which helps keep them cheerful, focused, and productive throughout the workday (Nison, 2021). However, some researchers and articles have claimed that remote work may actually damage the work-life balance of employees. Being unable to identify a clear line between home and office or switch off when working remotely has caused remote employees to experience increased stress and other health problems (Done, 2022).

This research study examined the relationship between remote work and work-life balance during the pandemic. What were the impacts of remote work, positive or negative, on employees' work-life balance? Since this research study was conducted with organizations in Southeast Asia, the culture of this region was also examined to see the role that it may play in impacting the work-life balance of employees while working from home.

This study investigated how working from home during the pandemic affected the work-life balance and quality of life of office employees who worked at the SEUM and its subsidiary missions'

in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. Two research questions that guided this study are shown below as follows:

1. What was the relationship between remote work and the work-life balance of SEUM employees in Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos during the COVID-19 pandemic?
  - How did the pandemic and the shift to remote work impact the work-life balance and personal and professional roles and responsibilities of employees of SEUM?
  - How important is work-life balance to employees of SEUM?
2. What helpful suggestions might SEUM stakeholders make about how remote work may be managed in order to improve work-life balance?

### **Literature Review**

According to a publication by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2016), employees and employers praised remote work for offering a better work-life balance. Remote work allows employees to carry out their responsibilities and activities outside of the office, providing them with full independence and choice over where they work and how they balance work with their personal lives. As a result, this helps improve their work-life balance and workforce inclusion. However, the blurring of lines between work and personal life may create a threat in terms of work-life balance. Overworking is one example that may result from remote work and harm employees' work-life balance. Additionally, distractions in the home environment may lead to decreased productivity. Research has suggested that some remote workers engage in non-work activities during work hours, such as social media use, online shopping, or household chores (Brower, 2023).

### ***Working from Home***

Working from home (WFH) has allowed employees to work remotely using tools and resources approved by their organizations (MBA Skool Team, 2022). WFH originated in the 1970s due to rising gas prices, offering flexibility and time savings for employees (Choudhury, 2020).

The pandemic significantly accelerated the WFH trend (Béland et al., 2020). The pandemic also impacted employee well-being, with numerous changes in work schedules and locations. Women were more likely than men to work from home during the pandemic (Hill, 2020). Many employees reported increased productivity and prefer continued remote work (Baudot & Kelly, 2020).

While WFH offers flexibility and avoids commutes, it is not suitable for all jobs, particularly those requiring physical presence. However, many jobs can be done remotely, including administrative, customer service, technical support, web development, writing/editing, and virtual assistant roles (Indeed Editorial Team, 2023).

### ***Benefits and Challenges of Remote Working***

Remote work during the pandemic increased significantly. Studies have shown that it brought many benefits to organizations, including improved productivity, performance, and retention (Farrer, 2020). Remote workers also benefit from time savings, schedule flexibility, and a better work-life balance (George, 2021). However, remote work can also have negative effects. It can blur the boundaries between work and personal life, leading to isolation and loneliness (Dimitropoulou, 2023). Studies have also shown that remote work can increase stress and negatively impact sleep (Messenger et al., 2019). Some challenges of remote work include technology issues, working environments, communication, and management (Green et al., 2020).

### ***Work-Life Balance***

Work-life balance refers to dividing one's time between work and personal life for good health and well-being (JOIN, 2022). This concept has roots in the idea of rest, as seen in the Bible (Genesis 2:2). The traditional six-day workweek, with one day of rest, evolved to a two-day weekend (Skills You

Need, 2024). Modern technology, however, makes it harder to disconnect from work, making work-life balance a significant challenge (Links International, 2024).

Employee well-being is directly linked to achieving a healthy work-life balance, and employees have rights in relation to managing their work schedules to accommodate their family responsibilities (Reilly et al., 2012). Work-life imbalance can negatively affect health, relationships, and productivity (Ahmed, 2020). Increased stress can weaken the immune system and worsen health problems (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2021). This is particularly concerning in cultures with strong work ethics, where long hours are common (Links International, 2024). Work-life balance also differs across generations. Boomers prioritize work and are willing to sacrifice their personal lives (Rook, 2019). Gen Xers value balance and seek flexibility to manage both work and personal commitments (Kerian, 2024; Rook, 2019). Millennials and Gen Z prioritize work-life integration, aiming to align personal and professional goals (PWC, 2011; Rook, 2019).

### ***SEUM Background***

The Southeastern Asia Union Mission (SEUM) is part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and covers the territories of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam (Adventist Asia, 2023). It was created in December 2021 from the dissolution of the Southeast Asia Union Mission (Southern Asia-Pacific Division, 2023), and consists of four Adventist Missions: Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam (Costello, 2020). The SEUM's headquarters office is in Thailand, and its main goal is to spread the gospel to the residents of these 4 countries (Southern Asia-Pacific Division, 2023). Within its territory, there are 88 churches with 37,318 members, and it serves a total population of 190 million (Adventist Yearbook Organization, 2024).

### ***Work and Culture of Southeast Asia***

Southeast Asia is a culturally diverse region with a rich history (Asudkar, 2020). Family and religion are central to Southeast Asian culture (ANU College of Asia & the Pacific, 2017). Buddhism is the dominant religion, but there are also significant Muslim, Christian, and Hindu populations (Andaya, 2021). Traditionally, Southeast Asian societies are collectivist, emphasizing the needs of the group over the individual (Xu, 2021). This is reflected in family structures and gender roles. The burden of housework often falls on women, even when they have full-time jobs (Tsuya et al., 2000).

The region is undergoing rapid development, with growing economies and a rising middle class. This is leading to modernization, but traditional values remain important (OECD, 2023). One aspect of traditional culture that persists is an emphasis on hard work (Jacob, 2022). Long working hours are common, and success is linked to dedication and perseverance (Greenspan, 2017). This work ethic can be seen in countries like Japan and Thailand, which rank poorly for work-life balance (Wong, 2022).

### **Methodology**

This study investigated the impact of the COVID-19 enforced shift to remote work on the work-life balance of Southeastern Asia Union Mission (SEUM) employees. The researcher used a descriptive quantitative approach to gather data, distributing a self-administered questionnaire to all 121 SEUM employees across the Cambodian, Laotian, Thai, and Vietnamese missions, along with the SEUM headquarters office in Thailand. The questionnaire, offered in English and the local languages for inclusivity, collected information on demographics, remote work experiences, and how those experiences affected work-life balance. To analyze this data, the researchers employed descriptive statistics to understand the overall trends, correlation tests to identify potential relationships between variables, and ANOVA or general linear models to understand the influence of multiple factors on work-life balance. This comprehensive approach using quantitative data analysis may provide valuable insights into how remote work during the pandemic impacted SEUM employees' work-life balance.

### **Findings**

This study specifically investigated the impact of the sudden change to remote work during the pandemic on the work-life balance of employees at the SEUM headquarters and its subsidiary mission

offices. Online self-administered questionnaires were distributed to all 121 SEUM office employees, to capture a comprehensive picture of experiences across the organization; the response rate was encouraging, with over half (62) of the targeted population participating in the survey.

The study's core finding painted a concerning picture, with a significant decrease in reported work-life balance among SEUM employees working remotely during the pandemic. This suggested that the lines between work and personal life blurred considerably for many employees during this challenging time.

A paired *t*-test was used to compare the mean scores of work-life balance before and during the pandemic to see if there were any significant differences; the results are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** Work-Life Balance Before and During the Pandemic

	Paired Differences						Significance			
				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			<i>t</i>	df	One-Sided <i>p</i>	Two-Sided <i>p</i>
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Lower	Upper					
Work Detachment and Personal Fulfilment (Pre) - Work Fulfillment and Effective Work-Life Integration (During)	0.281	0.986	0.137	0.006	0.555	2.053	51	.023	.045*	

Note: \*Significant at the .05 level

The results from Table 1 show significant differences, suggesting that the level of work-life balance of employees significantly decreased during the pandemic; the results were significant at the .05 level,  $t = 2.053$ ,  $p < .05$ . This is also visible through the descriptive statistics, which showed that during the pandemic, work-life balance declined significantly from 3.64 before to 3.36 during the pandemic.

Interestingly, the study found a generational difference in adapting to remote work. Table 2 presents the mean difference in work fulfillment for two age groups working from home during the pandemic. Older employees within SEUM reported a better work-life balance ( $p = .071$ ) while working remotely compared to their younger colleagues (27–42 years old).

**Table 2** Work-Life Balance Between Different Age Groups

Age	Age Range	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. Deviation
Work Fulfillment and Effective	27–42 years	40	3.250	0.733
Work-Life Integration (During)	43–58 years	11	3.740	0.941

Table 3 presents Spearman correlation coefficients to assess associations and direction (positive or negative) between the eight variables. It's important to note that while the initial survey received responses from 62 participants out of a population of 121, only 52 of them experienced remote work during the pandemic. Therefore, the analyses involving remote work experiences are based on data from 52 participants.

**Table 3** Analysis of Pre-Pandemic Work-Life Balance and Work Satisfaction Before/During Pandemic

		Work Detachment & Personal Fulfilment (Pre)	Work Engagement (Pre)	Commute & Work Completion (Pre)	Work Fulfillment & Effective Work-Life Integration (During)	Work From Home Efficiency (During)	Remote Work Satisfaction (During)	Supportive Remote Work Environment (Policy)	Strong Communication (Policy)
Work Detachment & Personal Fulfilment (Pre)	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.278*	.253*	.251	.270	-.392**	.250	-.090
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.029	.047	.073	.053	.004	.074	.525
	N	62	62	62	52	52	52	52	52
Work Engagement (Pre)	Correlation Coefficient	.278*	1.000	.085	.345*	-.029	.002	-.046	.344*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.029		0.513	0.012	0.839	0.988	0.747	0.013
	N	62	62	62	52	52	52	52	52
Commute & Work Completion (Pre)	Correlation Coefficient	.253*	.085	1.000	.011	.431**	.123	.402**	.147
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.047	.513		.937	.001	.384	.003	.300
	N	62	62	62	52	52	52	52	52
Work Fulfillment & Effective Work-Life Integration (During)	Correlation Coefficient	.251	.345*	.011	1.000	-.206	.064	.322*	.504**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.073	.012	.937		.144	.651	.020	.000
	N	52	52	52	52	52	52	52	52
Work From Home Efficiency (During)	Correlation Coefficient	.270	-.029	.431**	-.206	1.000	.131	.183	.069
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.053	.839	.001	.144		.356	.193	.629
	N	52	52	52	52	52	52	52	52
Remote Work Satisfaction (During)	Correlation Coefficient	-.392**	.002	.123	.064	.131	1.000	.027	.582**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.988	.384	.651	.356		.848	.000
	N	52	52	52	52	52	52	52	52
Supportive Remote Work Environment (Policy)	Correlation Coefficient	.250	-.046	.402**	.322*	.183	.027	1.000	.145
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.074	.747	.003	.020	.193	.848		.304
	N	52	52	52	52	52	52	52	52
Strong Communication (Policy)	Correlation Coefficient	-.090	.344*	.147	.504**	.069	.582**	.145	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.525	.013	.300	.000	.629	.000	.304	
	N	52	52	52	52	52	52	52	52

Code. \*Correlation significant at the .05 level (2-tailed); \*\*Correlation significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

The results highlighted that employees' remote work satisfaction during the pandemic was significantly correlated to their level of work-life balance (work detachment and personal fulfilment - Pre) before the pandemic. However, the correlation coefficient of -.392 indicated a negative and moderate correlation, suggesting that employees who perceived a high level of work-life balance pre pandemic had a low level of remote job satisfaction during COVID-19.

It is also important to note that remote work satisfaction during the pandemic was significantly and positively correlated with strong communication of organizational policy regarding remote working,  $r = .582$ ,  $p < .01$ . This relationship was observed to be strong with a high coefficient. Moreover, work-life balance during the pandemic had a significant and positive correlation with the remote work environment policy and strong communication policy (both policies).

The effect of remote work on work-life balance during the pandemic, with the moderating effects of remote work satisfaction and policy factors, were also tested. Tables 4 and 5 show a general linear model that was run because the grouping variable was not numerical.

**Table 4** *Tests of Between-Subjects Effects*

Dependent Variable:						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
Corrected model	14.497 <sup>a</sup>	7	2.071	5.165	.000	
Intercept	10.750	1	10.750	26.809	.000	
Hours during COVID	0.069	1	0.069	0.172	.680	
Support. Remote work env. policy	0.156	1	0.156	0.389	.536	
Strong communication policy	10.300	1	10.300	25.687	.000	
Remote work satisfaction during	0.054	1	0.054	0.136	.714	
Hours during COVID * SRWE policy	1.703	1	1.703	4.246	.045	
Hours during COVID * SC policy	0.623	1	0.623	1.554	.219	
Hours during COVID * RWS dur.	1.135	1	1.135	2.832	.100	
Error	17.642	44	0.401			
Total	621.082	52				
Corrected Total	32.139	51				

Code. <sup>a</sup> associated with corrected model ( $R^2 = .451$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = .364$ )

**Table 5** *Parameter Estimates*

Parameter	B	Std. Error	t	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Intercept	2.099	0.575	3.653	.001	0.941	3.257
[Hours during COVID=1]	0.366	0.882	0.415	.680	-1.411	2.142
[Hours during COVID=2]	0 <sup>a</sup>					
Support. Remote work env. policy	0.283	0.141	2.002	.052	-0.002	0.568
Strong communication policy	0.408	0.140	2.907	.006	0.125	0.691
Remote work satisfaction during	-0.315	0.128	-2.461	.018	-0.573	-0.057
[Hours during COVID=1] * SRWE policy	-0.812	0.394	-2.061	.045	-1.606	-0.018
[Hours during COVID=2] * SRWE policy	0 <sup>a</sup>					
[Hours during COVID=1] * SC policy	0.266	0.213	1.247	.219	-0.164	0.696
[Hours during COVID=2] * SC policy	0 <sup>a</sup>					
[Hours during COVID=1] * RWS dur.	0.517	0.307	1.683	.100	-0.102	1.137
[Hours during COVID=2] * RWS dur.	0 <sup>a</sup>					

The results showed that the overall regression model was statistically significant,  $F = 5.165$ ,  $p < .001$  in predicting work-life balance. The effect of remote work hours during the pandemic was insignificant,  $F = 0.172$ ,  $p = .680$ . However, one of the moderating effects, namely Remote Work X Supportive Remote Work Environment (SRWE), or the organizational policy, significantly predicted work-life balance,  $F = 4.246$ ,  $p < .05$ . This implied that the effect of remote work on work-life balance differed based on how supportive was the remote work environment policy. The coefficient was negative, with fewer hours worked as compared to more hours; this suggested that the effect of fewer hours worked had a less significant impact on work-life balance than did the effect of more hours worked. In other words, a better remote work policy significantly improved the link between higher hours worked and work-life balance.

This highlighted the importance of transparent communication during periods of significant change. Even more impactful was that a supportive remote work environment policy—likely

encompassing flexible work hours, clear expectations, and access to necessary resources—positively influenced work-life balance even for employees who reported working longer hours during the pandemic. This suggests that well-designed remote work policies can mitigate some of the challenges associated with remote work and contribute to a healthier work-life balance.

While the shift to remote work during the pandemic presented challenges to work-life balance for SEUM employees, the study also identified key strategies for mitigating those challenges. Clear communication of remote work policies and implementation of supportive remote work environments can significantly improve employee well-being and satisfaction during periods of remote work. The study also suggested that pre-pandemic work-life balance experiences may influence how employees adjust to remote work arrangements.

## Discussion

This research on SEUM employees during the COVID-19 pandemic found a decline in reported work-life balance when working remotely. Potential contributing factors included the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life, increased distractions in the home environment, and additional stress brought on by the pandemic. This aligned with findings from a qualitative study on UK remote workers, which identified overwork and its negative impact on well-being as key challenges (Grant et al., 2013).

The reasons behind the reported decline in work-life balance for SEUM's remote workforce during the pandemic were also explored, and several factors were found to have contributed to this problem. Firstly, the physical separation between work and personal life that a traditional office provides was blurred. Working from home can lead to situations where employees answer work emails while having dinner or take work calls during downtime, making it difficult to switch off and relax truly. Secondly, home environments are often filled with distractions compared to a structured office. Chores, family members, pets, or even the television can all compete for attention, hindering focus and creating a feeling of constantly playing catch-up. Thirdly, the pandemic itself was a significant source of stress for many people. Previous researchers have reported links between the pandemic and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress (Montano & Acebes, 2020). Concerns about health, job security, and the overall uncertainty of the situation likely bled into work life, making it even harder to achieve a healthy balance. Finally, establishing routines and schedules to maintain work-life separation can be difficult, potentially leading to longer working hours or an inability to disconnect at the end of the workday. These combined factors likely created significant tension in achieving work-life balance for the SEUM remote workforce during an already stressful time.

Interestingly, the study revealed that older employees reported better work-life balance while working remotely compared to younger colleagues. A 2016 study involving 500 workers from Finland, Lithuania, and Sweden produced similar results: workers in older age groups were more likely to report maintaining better work-life balance (Richert-Kaźmierska & Stankiewicz, 2016). This disparity might be due to generational differences in priorities or how work-life balance was defined. Younger employees, perhaps focused on career advancement, might be more inclined to work longer hours or be readily available remotely. Older employees nearing retirement might prioritize personal time and be more comfortable establishing clear boundaries between work and life. Additionally, the very definition of work-life balance could differ. Younger generations might see it as a clear separation of work and personal space, even if it meant longer hours at the office. Older workers might value flexibility and the ability to manage personal tasks throughout the workday, even if these lines were blurred a bit. It's important to remember that these are potential explanations based on the study's findings, and further research would be needed for definitive conclusions. After all, not all younger or older employees perfectly fit these categories; there are variations within each age group. Nevertheless, this finding highlighted the potential impact of generation on how remote work influences work-life balance.

This study shone a light on the importance of clear communication and supportive environments for a successful remote work experience. Employees who felt included with more in-depth

communication were almost five times more likely to report increased productivity, according to a study about the future of remote work (Alexander et al., 2021). Employees who felt that their organization clearly communicated remote work policies and offered a supportive environment reported higher satisfaction with these arrangements. Clear communication translates into well-defined policies and expectations around remote work. These include issues like work hours, communication protocols, performance expectations, and how to access necessary resources. When employees understand these aspects, it helps them to avoid confusion, frustration, and feelings of isolation. Supportive environments can take many forms, from providing ergonomic equipment for home offices to offering training on remote work tools and best practices. It can even involve creating virtual social events to help employees stay connected. Essentially, a supportive environment allowed remote employees to feel equipped, valued, and connected, even when they were physically apart. By prioritizing clear communication and building supportive remote work environments, organizations can significantly improve employee satisfaction with this style of work.

The pandemic itself likely played a role in the reported decrease in work-life balance. Future research is recommended to explore the impact of remote work outside of a pandemic setting.

### **Implications and Limitations**

This study offers valuable insights for understanding work-life balance in the age of remote work. Traditional ideas emphasizing a strict work-life separation need to be adjusted to the blurred boundaries of remote settings. This research showed how remote work can make it difficult to truly disconnect from work. Interestingly, communication was an important factor to be considered. Clear communication from employers regarding remote work policies was found to be positively linked to employee satisfaction with remote work. This suggests that communication itself can be a resource for remote workers, empowering them to manage their work-life balance more effectively.

Finally, the research underscored the importance of context. The pandemic significantly impacted everyone's work-life balance, and it is important to differentiate the long-term effects of remote work from temporary disruptions caused by such global crises. In essence, understanding the unique challenges and opportunities presented by remote work, along with clear communication from employers, is crucial for achieving a healthy work-life balance in this new work environment.

Some constraints that limited this study need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the data was collected near the end of the pandemic, a time of significant challenges that likely influenced employee perceptions of work-life balance. Studying remote work outside of a pandemic could reveal different outcomes. Secondly, the study focused on religious non-profit organizations, whose work culture might differ from for-profit companies. This limits how broadly the findings can be applied to other workplaces. Finally, the relatively small sample size and reliance on self-reported information may have introduced potential bias. Future research with a larger, more diverse group of participants and objective data collection methods could strengthen our understanding of work-life balance in remote work environments.

### **Conclusion**

This study investigated the impact of remote work on work-life balance for SEUM employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results showed that employees generally reported a worse work-life balance while working remotely compared to their pre-pandemic office work. This suggests that adjusting to remote work can be challenging, especially for those who already had a good work-life balance before.

An interesting finding was the positive link between clear communication from the organization and employee satisfaction with remote work. Employees who felt well-informed about remote work policies and practices reported being happier with the arrangements.

The study also identified both positive and negative aspects of remote work. While employees appreciated the flexibility, relaxed dress code, and potential cost savings on commuting and childcare, they also faced challenges like communication difficulties, isolation, and decreased productivity due

to distractions. It's important to remember that the pandemic itself likely played a role in the reported decrease in work-life balance. Factors like lockdowns, family stress, and overall pandemic anxiety could have contributed to these findings.

This study recommends that the SEUM improve remote worker support through clear and ongoing communication about policies, expectations, and best practices. A well-designed remote work policy that prioritizes work-life balance may be implemented, with employee-centric practices (flexible scheduling, breaks, dedicated workspaces) and organizational support (clear expectations, communication tools, well-being resources, respecting time off). Regular check-ins and a possible hybrid work model could also be considered. Additionally, training programs on time management, communication tools, and maintaining work-life boundaries could equip employees with skills needed to succeed in a remote work environment. Finally, it is suggested that the SEUM explore initiatives to support employee well-being, such as stress management programs or mental health resources, to create healthier work environments overall.

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